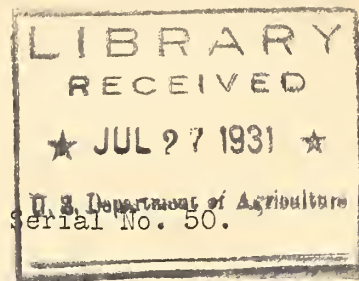
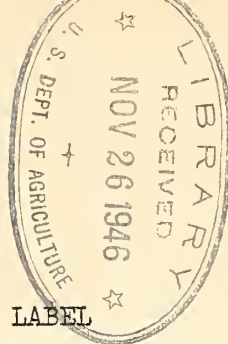


Historic, Archive Document

Do not assume content reflects current scientific knowledge, policies, or practices.

Excerpt from a radio talk by
W. W. Vincent, chief, western district,
Food and Drug Administration, U. S.
Department of Agriculture, delivered
through KGO, San Francisco, and associated
N. B. C. stations, July 23, 1931



HOW TO READ THE LABEL

Cathartics

The increasing and indiscriminate use of cathartics by the people of the United States is looked upon with alarm by the medical profession. Likewise, the fraudulent claims of curative value that are made for many laxative preparations are objectionable. Cathartics are habit-producing and the claim that laxatives will eliminate waste materials or poison from the body is false, because laxatives do not accomplish this purpose --- they eliminate waste from the lower intestines only. Laxatives and tonic drugs do not go together, since tonics are supposed to be taken over considerable periods and if they contain laxatives they are apt to produce the laxative habit. If you are taking a tonic, ascertain whether it carries a laxative principle.

"Cathartic" is the broad term including the various drugs, chemicals or other agents generally employed. A "laxative" is a mildly acting cathartic.

In general there are six classes of cathartics:

First, the oils, among which are castor oil, mineral oil, croton oil, and perhaps olive oil. All are recognized by the United States Pharmacopoeia.

Second, the coal tar preparations. The most important is phenolphthalein.

Third, the bulk formers: agar, recognized by the Pharmacopoeia; psyllium seed and bran.

Fourth, the salts: Epsom salts, or magnesium sulphate; Rochelle salts, a mixture of potassium and sodium tartrates; Glauber's salts, or sodium sulphate; sodium phosphate and potassium bitartrate or cream of tartar, all of which are recognized by the Pharmacopoeia.

Fifth, the vegetable drugs, included in which are cascara sagrada, senna, rhubarb, aloes, podophyllum and colocynth--- all are U.S.P.

Sixth, mercurial preparations, including calomel, blue mass, and gray powder. They, too, have U. S. P. recognition.

Certain mineral waters might be included, but I omit them as a class because their laxative effects depend upon one or more of the salts I have named. Too, the majority of mineral waters, of themselves, are only mildly laxative, if at all, unless they have been fortified or concentrated by evaporation. Their labels tell you if either practice was followed.

Still another class of laxative preparations is known by the names of the originators or from the sources from which their formulas were obtained. They are standard preparations or standard formulas. You know some of these by name, and I will tell you what they are. Most widely known is probably

Hinckle's pills, containing cascara, aloes, podophyllum, belladonna, strychnine and ginger. Then there is St. Germain Tea, composed of senna, sambucus, potassium bitartrate and certain aromatics. There are Barker's pills, which contain aloes, podophyllum, colocynth, nux vomica, ipecac and hyoscyamus; and Gregory's Powder, composed of rhubarb, magnesium oxide and ginger. You may get these standard preparations under your druggist's own label.

Now, let's discuss the six classes of cathartics previously mentioned. What are the principles that govern their action? Let's start out with the oils, the first group mentioned. Their actions differ. Castor oil is a simple purgative. Mineral oil, a lubricant, is not absorbed as is olive oil, which affects laxative action only in so far as it escapes digestion and absorption. Croton oil is a very drastic and dangerous cathartic to be used only upon doctor's prescription.

The second class mentioned, the coal tar preparations, includes phenolphthalein. Phenolphthalein is not absorbed into the system and is eliminated through the kidneys and bowels. Its laxative action is caused by increasing the liquid content of the lower bowel.

The third group includes the bulk formers. They are in the nature of demulcents. They should not be used in cases of intestinal irritation or stoppage, and to some children and to some adults may cause excessive intestinal irritation.

The fourth, the salts, owe their cathartic effect to the fact that they interfere with water absorption. Where inflammation exists their use is questionable.

The fifth, or vegetable class, owe their effect to irritation which results in peristalsis. Of these the emodin-bearing drugs, included in which are the aloes, cascara and senna, are the milder of the irritants and the more commonly used. The more powerful include colocynth, podophyllum and jalap.

The sixth or mercurial group likewise act by irritation, exciting peristalsis and lessening fluid absorption. They are rather dangerous. You know the physician usually administers calomel in rather small amounts. Calomel is mercurous chloride, while mercuric chloride is the antiseptic--- perhaps you know it as corrosive sublimate--- with which you are familiar. The digestive juices, acting upon the mercurous salt, convert it slowly into mercuric salt. The irritation resulting from the increased peristalsis caused by the system's effort to eliminate the poison produced explains the action of this product.

Now, label readers, you can not from reading labels get all needed information about these products. You can, however, get some information about many that are offered you. Some labels indicate the products to be "Purely Vegetable." Therefore, you know they will contain no phenolphthalein, calomel or salts. If the label states "Contains no mineral substance," it must contain no salts or mercury compounds. If it bears the letters "U.S.P." or "N.F.", it is one of the products described in the United States Pharmacopoeia or the National Formulary and its composition can be learned by referring to your druggist's copy of those books. Some people prefer phenolphthalein preparations and the label or the advertising matter sometimes tells you if you are getting such products.

Just one further word. Medicated biscuits, which are distributed as laxative preparations, likewise chewing gum and other confections, sometimes have phenolphthalein or other laxative substance incorporated therein. Before giving your children such products, exploited as beneficial in cases of constipation, I would suggest you read the labels carefully. Some preparations with coined names, perhaps indicating a chocolate or fruit product, for example, "Figettes," "Pruneletts," or "Olive Lax," will usually be found to declare somewhere in their labeling the presence of the laxative ingredient. It is not the fruit or flavor to which they owe their efficacy. To read their labels will make you more discriminating buyers. Your child may get but one cracker or confection where otherwise it might have gotten six. Remember, the experts tell us that children, with proper diet and exercise, should not need laxatives.

###

